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ABSTRACT

This essay is a history of the process of completing an ethnographic study in a child care setting. It presents reflections on entering the field site, keeping field notes, and analyzing data. An exploratory study of a group of preschool children led to the selection of qualitative methods and clarified the theoretical basis for research. In completing the formal study, triangulated methods of participant observation, interviewing, and record and contextual analysis were used. The use of ethnomethodology to explore events themselves led to a dual analysis of theoretical propositions and empirical data in which theory provided a frame of reference for conducting field study and observation-based findings led to theoretical reorganization. These methods proved to be appropriate for the setting and for the sociological data collected. The role of participant-as-observer was manageable by adopting a passive attitude as adult-without-authority. The children responded to the presence of a researcher with mild curiosity. Their level of interest was evaluated reactively at the conclusion of observation. The analysis of data proceeded steadily through three phases and culminated in the full description of typologies and strategies used by the preschool children. The interpretive process of ethnographic methodology was valuable in constructing detailed, contextual information about children's everyday social behavior. (Author/RH)

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"I'm taking notes."

Reactive Analysis of Doing Ethnography in a Child Care Program

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This reactive analysis is based on research done at a child care program in Raritan, New Jersey. Participant/observation was carried out for an eight month period in 1983-1984. The final study was made as partial requirement for the degree of Ph.D. in Early Childhood Education at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

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Abstract

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Reactive Analysis of Doing Ethnography in a Child Care Program

This essay is a history of the process of completing an ethnographic study in a child care setting. It is reflection on entering the field site, keeping field notes, and analyzing data. An exploratory study of a group of preschool children led to the selection of qualitative methods and clarified the theoretical basis for research. In completing the formal study, triangulated methods of participant/observation, interviewing, and record and contextual analysis were used. These methods proved to be appropriate to the setting and for the sociological data collected. The role of participant-as-observer was manageable by adopting a passive attitude as adult without authority. The children responded to the presence of a researcher with mild curiosity. Their level of interest was evaluated reactively at the conclusion of observation. The analysis of data proceded steadily through three phases. The culmination was the full description of typologies and strategies used by the preschool children. The interpretive process of ethnographic methodology was valuable in constructing detailed, contextual information about children's everyday social behavior.

"I'm taking notes."
Reactive Analysis of Doing Ethnography in a Child Care Program

A child care program is a good place to do field research. It is a natural setting which allows children freedom of action. It is a social setting where children form their own groups and alliances. And it is an open, stable setting, which permits direct interaction between adults and children. The purpose of this essay is the investigation of the ethnographic method used to study children in such a setting. Ethnographic methods were chosen as the most appropriate tool for research in order to observe naturally occurring events among groups of children. The information is presented as a reactive analysis, in the form of natural history, in an attempt to look inside the method. This format is also used to describe the theory process used in the research, as explanation of the nature of emergent hypotheses.

The Pilot Study

Doing an ethnographic study in a child care setting seemed reasonable in theory but my skills were largely untested. As a beginning point, to assess the feasibility of the research, a pilot study was designed. This was to be an exploratory study to clarify research questions, an opportunity to choose an appropriate setting, and a trial of my skills. A pilot study was designed to be completed at a child care program site with children ages two and three.

Early in the process of designing the study, questions for possible investigation and approaches for analysis were undefined. My interest in the general topic of young children's socialization had resulted in several short papers, but discovering a possible theoretical base was a perplexing problem. During the same time, qualitative research methods were discovered as a possible alternative approach. An outline of several broad theoretical questions and selection of the primary research method, participant/observation, were completed, along with possible data sources. With consultation, the theoretical basis came into focus and the frame for the pilot study was created.

Data collection was scheduled for five months. The experience was one of constant revision, from broad to specific. It resulted in extensive modification of the theoretical base. The site chosen for study and the specific group of children were appropriate; evidence was possible to gather there.

The decision to develop an ethnographic study came with success using the participant/observer method. The role was comfortable, not overwhelming. The amount of time spent collecting data was three mornings a week, sufficient to maintain continuity in a setting that kept a basic schedule day to day. The amount of time weekly was adequate but the length of time in the field (March to July) was minimal for discovery of significant changes over time. The full study would need to be conducted for a longer period of time, to the point of data redundancy. Beginning the

pilot study in the spring, long after the children had become acquainted with each other, proved to lead observation away from the research questions into other areas of study. Rather than redefine the questions, further investigation of the primary theory (Goffman, 1977) led to a decision to revise the time line for beginning observations with a newly formed group the following fall.

The pilot study served to define research theory and develop observation skills. It did not extend long enough, however, to result in expansion of theory or development of typologies. The procedures for analytic induction were not tested until the full study began, but initial steps taken in the pilot study were valuable for clarifying the final research theory.

Ethnographic Methods

The use of ethnographic methodology during the pilot study verified children's everyday creation of social transactions. The main premise of research was stable. Several of the procedural steps were modified during the course of the pilot study due to the setting and age of the children.

By the time the formal study began, triangulated methods (Cicourel, 1974), were chosen to elicit a "thick" or full description of the observed events as they occurred. Triangulation is a qualitative approach to the study of created transactions which vary from gathering to gathering and from action to action. Validity was sought in these very contrasts. A combination of

research methods was also a measure of compensation for one investigator conducting all field study and data analysis. The methods chosen were dissimilar, yet were used to measure the same unit. Participant/observation was chosen for data gathering. Interviewing was employed to study perceptions that did not come under direct observation. Record and contextual analysis were used to support participant/observation and interviewing.

Triangulation made possible avenues of investigation for the verbal and nonverbal actions of very young children other than self interpretation. Deliberately multifaceted research methods called for attention to as many components as possible. Triangulation was chosen as an aid to validity over quantified responses or coded behavioral samples which give indication of prosocial development but not the substance of it. Ethnomethodology was used to explore events themselves and validity was found in the repeatability and variability of those transactions rather than arbitrary predefinition of rules or structures of reality.

While participant/observation is typically associated with anthropological research, this method was useful for gathering detailed information about groups of children in the classroom. Transactions were coded for time of day, number of persons involved, and the location of the events. These dimensions are interrelated in sociological theory and the use of participant/observation to measure them should not be underestimated. Commonplace social scenes are made visible, "not through selection

of certain variables that then stand for the situation, but through examining the usually unnoticed background--the whole situation. For it is this very background that children use to develop schemata, interpretation, meanings" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 36).

A combination of participation in the regular day-to-day experiences of children and observation of those experiences was chosen for two reasons: first, participant/observation made research as unobtrusive as possible; second, participation aided comprehending the perspectives of the children studied. Because of the nature of child care, my participation was limited to joining in the daily morning activities of the children. The specific investigator role I used was participant-as-observer. This role allowed for relationships to be built with the children because of continuing presence. It also provided a task, that of observing, so I was not categorized fully as teacher by the children. Where possible, any overt reaction to my role was identified in the data.

Participant/observation allowed for more than a spot check or tally of isolated situations; I was able to discern the underlying patterns of social actions and their context through extensive note taking. The process was one of documenting and interpreting.

The ethnomethodology used for this project led to a dual analysis of theoretical propositions and empirical data. This means that theory provided a frame of reference for conducting field study, while at the same time, observation findings led to

theoretical reorganization (Garfinkel, 1967). Because this study was limited to one specific setting of young children and was of relatively short duration, it was termed a micro-ethnographic study.

The Formal Study

Field Entry. Permission to conduct research at the child care site was gained easily the fall following the pilot study. The initial contact was made through the President of the Board of Trustees. He approved the idea of the study and contacted the center in my behalf. A meeting with the Director of the center was supportive. She had an interest in the subject, eagerly read the study proposal, and asked for permission to read the final document. Following a brief presentation at a subsequent board meeting, permission was granted for research to begin. Board members requested the center's identity not be fictionalized and asked that communication with parents be clear and concise.

The teachers were approached during the following week with an explanation of the purposes of research in order to secure their cooperation. They all agreed to the study. Additional time was spent with the two teachers of the group chosen for study, explaining the amount of time research required, the nature of observation, and the role of researcher as participant. The teachers' response was positive. They expressed interest in the subject and willingness to have another adult present in the room. The informal procedure of field entry made a low profile possible

in the classroom. It also allowed additional information to be communicated when it became necessary.

During the process of entering the field, and through the course of observation, there was no pressure to influence or place restrictions on the research by anyone. Complete freedom for observation and access to historical records was granted by the board and staff. Though the center personnel had not participated in research before, they understood they were not being evaluated, which relieved them of the need to control the research.

Participant/Observer Role. It was almost possible to slip into the classroom without notice. The children barely acknowledged the presence of a new adult, so the children's activity was not intentionally disrupted. Occasionally through the course of field study, a child would look up and call out a greeting to me, sometimes prompting a series of greetings from others. The majority continued to attend to the task at hand.

The participant/observer role consisted of joining in the daily sequence of activities of the twos and threes in the center. The time of day for involvement was kept stable to observe the maximum amount of unstructured transactions. Because of special events or the absence of one teacher, twos and threes were occasionally combined with older children away from the classroom. On those days, observation of free play with peers was not possible. Observation was conducted twice a week with approximately one

hundred hours of data-gathering logged over an eight-month period.

During the course of observation, the role of participant/observer changed. The reverse of what many researchers experience in doing field work occurred. In other studies, participant/observers have reported the dilemma of increasing their participation on the field, while observation decreases. Because the majority of ethnographic studies have been done in exotic cultures, familiarity took a while and allowed the researcher to spend more time making initial observations. The child care center was not an exotic culture, therefore, easy to enter.

The role of teacher was familiar to me and those skills were required in the early phase of field study. Children needed demonstration of equipment in the room, such as puzzles, games, and toys. An attempt was made to maintain a neutral adult role without authority, yet the children frequently turned to the person closest at hand for information or assistance. Since my base of observation was often a seat on the floor, children interrupted observation. At first, it was difficult to remember not at act like a teacher. Over time, this became easier by adopting a passive attitude and sitting near areas of activity.

Interestingly, while no children directly asked about the research task of constant note-taking during the first four months, they did cluster around as they played. Often, they brought objects close by and sat down to play, with minimal discussion.

During the first month, most conversation with me was a request for assistance or information on the function of an object. Occasionally a request was made for intervention in a disagreement. Without exception, this request was responded to by suggesting the children return to the situation and use their words to say what they needed. Only in cases of possible physical injury did I attempt to intervene.

Three months into the study, as skill in data gathering increased and the children began to take my presence and lack of authority for granted, the participant/observer role shifted. Observation time without interruption lengthened and the need to participate became minimal. Children gradually began to regard the researcher as a neutral adult, available for assistance, but infrequently requested. Conversation, by then evolved to soliciting me for fantasy play with invitations to "Have a cup of tea," or "Do you want to rock my baby?" The simpler requests were complied with but the more complex were diverted.

On several occasions, a child asked what was being written. These questions were logged and later tallied to indicate the degree of disruption the children sensed. The first direct notice of data recording was not until the fifth month when one girl looked at the log and asked, "What are you doing?" The simple reply, "I'm taking notes," satisfied her and she moved away to play. A month later, a second girl knelt down and asked, "What are you doing?" The answer, "I'm taking notes," was not enough and she

asked, "Why?" "Because I like to write what you do." She shrugged her shoulders, got up, and walked away. A week later, a boy stood nearby and asked, "What are you making?" "I'm making notes," was all the answer he needed. The following week, a third girl asked, "Why are you making this?" The answer, "Because I like to write what you do," made her laugh as she walked away. A fourth girl was the last to question, the next month: "What are you writing for?" "I like to write what you do" was the answer given. She stayed close by to watch for a moment before leaving to play. In the eighth month, the third girl questioned again, this time wanting to participate in the writing. She said, "I'm going to write something...my name." She reached for the pen and made three marks on the log.

There is no ready explanation for the lack of interest in the data recording. The teachers did not keep regular notes in the presence of the children, thus conditioning them for an adult writing. Perhaps the teachers' occasional focus on preparation of materials rather than directly on the children contributed to the lack of interest. It was evident the children did not require constant attention, which allowed them to ignore, for the most part, the presence of a note-taker. Because I had no previous connection to the children and took a consistent role as neutral adult, the children did not need my attention. If I had been their teacher prior to beginning research, note-taking would have been interrupted frequently. Not surprisingly, the five children who

acknowledged the intrusion in their midst were the oldest and most verbal in the group.

It took several weeks to structure a comfortable role in the classroom. The children were not used to an adult who would not exercise authority. The more consistently I acted as observer, the more willing the children were to acknowledge that role. As time went by, the role as participant was limited to responding to the overtures of the children. Participation in group activities was peripheral, in an attempt to avoid disruption of the flow of transactions.

The teachers were helpful in allowing access to all parts of the room and limiting their conversation with me while observation was in progress. As they noticed transactions happening in other parts of the center or at other times of day, they communicated these eagerly. These reports were noted separately from the log, to be supportive evidence of the children's repertoire.

Having been a teacher and administrator in preschool programs was an asset to constructing a role as participant/observer, but was not sufficient preparation. Only time spent in the classroom and review of field notes enhanced the process. A distinct difference was apparent between teaching children and observing them. In the first case, children learned the rules; in the second, the observer learned the rules.

Field Notes. The role of passive observer allowed time for taking extensive notes. Recording was limited to concrete

descriptions of children's transactions. Conversations were recorded verbatim as much as possible. The goal was to capture the total transaction: the children, the setting, the conversation, and the gestures. Over the course of observation, through reflection on data already accumulating, the process of recording was streamlined. Irrelevant data was excluded. Incidents which were interesting, but led away from the theoretical base and the research questions were deleted. Key episodes were marked for entrance and exit with brackets and the substance of episodes was written in paragraph form. Complex transactions were bracketed for further study. A limited number of codes were devised to indicate time, location, and activity. These were primarily abbreviations. Children's names were shortened to initials or nicknames in the notes. Audio recording in the classroom was attempted during the early phase of field study but discontinued because of the distraction of other noisy play close by.

The difficulty of being the solitary researcher in a classroom of twos and threes was obvious from the beginning. For every transaction recorded on one side of the room, another may have been missed. Had this study been limited to a brief observation cycle of a week or even a month, the number and type of observations would have been incomplete. Because the field study lasted for eight months, to the point of data redundancy, it was considered close to exhaustive. This was not a study of frequency, though an attempt to compensate for the inability to be in all places at

once was made by taking stations in various places in the room. Six positions, on the floor, in chairs, and on the window seat were rotated through field study.

Data Analysis. Examination of data proceded through several phases, enmeshed with participant/observations. The first phase involved discovery of four strategies of greeting, invitation, compliment, and aid, as defined by Goffman (1967). These were observed repeatedly and incorporated into the analysis from the beginning of the study. The concept of key episodes as the basic unit of analysis was borrowed from prior ethnographic research (Corsaro, 1979). This became the format for organizing notes.

The four strategies were a substantial framework for initiating participant/observation, since there were numerous episodes to record. As early as the first several weeks in the classroom, however, new sequences of transaction were apparent. Parameters for these patterns were formulated to guide observations, but specific definitions and titles for the new types remained unclear for some weeks.

A short period of review began following the collection of field notes from the first four months. Preparation for holiday activities during the month of December in the classroom provided a break from the normal agenda. Free play time was taken up with special teacher-directed preparations, so observation was discontinued for a time. Further refinement of types of transaction and data collection procedure took place then. Several rudimentary

patterns were noticeable and clear verbal rituals had been heard repeatedly. These were marked with asterisks in field notes. A change in the classroom routine was anticipated the following month with the addition of Monday Sharing Circle, though extensive expansion of one strategy (compliment) was not forseen.

The second phase of analysis began during the second four months of data collection with the selection of all possible transactions from field notes. The initiatory rituals and primary responses were analyzed for similarities and transcribed verbatim on rosters by type. The additional strategies discovered during participant/observation were labeled, resulting in a total of eight rosters. Sequences of data which were considered relevant but at variance with the types were listed separately with analytic notes on their discrepancies. These were deliberately set aside for later consideration. Sorting by roster was not complete until revisions were made. Some sequences were shifted to other rosters after more careful evaluation. Other sequences, originally overlooked, were defined and added to rosters.

Final analysis involved the discovery of patterns within types. Clustering of sequences was done simultaneously with the writing of narrative portions. This process naturally unfolded through writing the narratives and resulted in discovery of additional strategies. Looking for patterns was not the same as looking for generalizations. There was no search for a model that would infer or predict further behavior. Connections and

relationships were the goal, instead of predictability.

Inductive analysis included all episodes that had been observed, not just a few chosen illustrations. Attempting to be inclusive resulted in expansion and modification of the original typologies, giving strength to findings.

Because the study was done descriptively, an attempt was made to use the children's natural language. The children's points of view were central to the reconstruction of their transactions. Their use of language was both the limiting and enlightening factor in interpreting key episodes. Phrases used ritually revealed the children's capacity for functioning by rules of conduct. Their disregard of other verbal ceremonies showed their focus of attention was on things of an immediate nature.

The search for meaning of the children's actions was made through observation and post hoc analysis. Through those techniques, an incredibly broad range of transactions was discovered. The fullness of their daily complex experience was captured at length and in depth.

Ethnographic methods proved very useful for deciphering vignettes and descriptions of the social reality of very young children. Such methods are based on an interpretive process involving subjective communication among children and, in addition, the perspective of a researcher. The outcome has historical objectivity, demonstrating the importance of focusing on the complexity of everyday transactions.

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